Secrets and Lies: Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto* (2017) and the Uncovered Memory of Italian East Africa

Abstract

It is true that expansionism under Fascism did not, for a long time, receive the attention that it deserved. This period of historiographic and literary amnesia has now, however, come to a close. As regards literary production, recent years have seen the publication of a number of highly regarded works – by such well-known writers as Gabriella Ghermandi or Igiaba Scego – that have used the novel as a means of exploring the legacies of empire. The article explores one of the most recent additions to this body of work, Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2017). More specifically, it addresses the theme of secrets and their revelation that lies at the heart of the novel. It asks what are the social and psychological ramifications of the discovery of the nature of imperial conquest under fascism. It explores how the novel interacts with the writing of those transnational African/ Italian authors who have confronted the legacy of Italy's colonial past. The article considers the overall vision that *Sangue giusto* offers of Italy's relationship with Ethiopia, of the conceptual universe of colonialism, and of the enduring topicality of the memory of Italy's imperial past.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ethiopia, Memory, Race, Secret, Time, Transcultural

Introduction

Until relatively recently many historians and critics could justifiably claim that the story of Italian imperialism – stretching, roughly speaking, from the end of the nineteenth century until the fall of Fascism – did not occupy a notable presence within public consciousness in Italy and that it had not received the weight of international consideration that it deserved.[1] In the early years of this century a number of edited volumes on Italian colonialism, that brought together the work of scholars from many parts of the world, were published in both English and Italian, with the explicit purpose of encouraging greater global awareness of the enduring significance of the history of Italian expansionism in Africa.[2] With different emphases, each of these works considered the early years of Italian colonial expansion, the commercial appropriation of Eritrea and Somalia in the 1890s, the determined attempt to

extend the sphere of Italian influence into Ethiopia, the accentuation of the imperialist drive under Fascism (1922-43), the collapse of the empire in the wake of Italian entry into the Second World War, the legacies of the colonial enterprise as a whole. Each work also drew attention to the extended period of time in which Italy's former colonial presence in Africa and the eastern Mediterranean was not the focus of sustained international interest and to the relative scarcity of works of visual or literary culture that addressed the complexities of the legacy of empire.

At least ten years after the publication of this body of work and the gaps within historiography and collective memory to which they drew attention, it is true to say that the situation has changed. There has been a steady growth in work that has both reconstructed the stages of colonial involvement and interrogated its effects in the longer term.[3] The rise in academic interest in different parts of the world in the troubled history of Italian expansionism has been accompanied by the appearance, and widely publicized reception, of texts that have used the resources of literary communication to inquire into the question of how the events of Italy's colonial past are not merely of enduring relevance but continue to affect, both evidently and surreptitiously, contemporary experiences of the world. [4]

It is not surprising that the majority of writers who have used literature as a means of delving into some of the most tragic and unresolved episodes of the past can be defined as both transnational African and Italian writers. That is to say, they are writers who have grown up in those parts of East Africa that were witness to the arc of Italian colonialism and who now live between Africa and Italy and/or writers whose parents are both African and Italian.[5] Gabriella Ghermandi, for example, was born in Addis Ababa in the 1960s – her mother Ethiopian (of mixed parents) and her father Italian – and came to live in Bologna in 1979. Her most well-known text is the novel, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007) that recounts Ethiopian memories of the Italian occupation.[6] She is also a renowned performer of narratives adapted from the Ethiopian oral and musical tradition.[7] Igiaba Scego is an Italian writer and journalist of Somali parents – her father was a prominent Somali politician. Her works of fiction include *Rhoda* (Rome: Sinnos, 2004) and *Oltre Babilonia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008). She has written on the transgenerational nature of the experience of colonialism in her novel, *Adua* (Florence: Giunti, 2015).[8] In 2013, as Brioni notes, she started a

petition to have the monument in honour of the war criminal Rodolfo Graziani removed from the town in which was built, Affile, outside Rome (see below).

Belonging to an earlier generation, writers like Erminia Dell'Oro and Nicky Di Paolo have written on the significance of the multi-faceted nature of the legacy of the Italian presence in Africa. Born in Asmara in 1938, Dell'Oro returned to Italy in the late 1950s. Her works of fiction have addressed – in the semi-autobiographical novel *Asmara addio* (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1988) – the nature of the collective life of the Italian community after the war and – in *L'abbandono: una storia eritrea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991) – the lives of Italo-Eritrean children in the wake of the withdrawal of Italian influence from East Africa. Di Paolo was born in Eritrea in 1942 (where he studied medicine) and lived there until 1968. Like Dell'Oro, he has retained strong ties with the country of his birth and his works of fiction draw inspiration from historical events in Eritrea and Ethiopia and from his own experiences growing up in Africa. They include his novel *Hakim: quasi quasi torno in Eritrea* (Milan: Wichtig Editore, 1994) which draws closely on his years of medical training in Asmara and which reflects on the stages of the Eritrea's struggle with its powerful neighbour, Ethiopia; the novel *Mentuab: amore abissino in tre gradini di tempo* (Cosenza: Memoria, 2001) which, through the biography of the Empress of Ethiopia, Mentewab (1706-1773), evokes eighteenth-century Ethiopia; and, most recently, *Semira e i fiori dell'Eritrea* (Cosenza: Edibios, 2015) on the Eritrean war of independence.

The writing of authors such as Ghermandi, Scego or Dell'Oro has been accompanied by the work of writers who, though they may not have the same personal experience of the realities of the Horn of Africa, have nevertheless felt the urgency of developing a greater awareness of the history of Italian colonialism and its undeniable relevance to the present. As Di Paolo writes in his introduction to *Mentuab*, in the relatively brief history of Italy as a nation state, over fifty years were dedicated to developing an empire in eastern Africa and a period of that length has inevitably left an indelible imprint.[9] The crime-writer and TV presenter, Carlo Lucarelli has looked at the historical reality of the Italian presence in Africa in his works *L'ottava vibrazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008) and *Il tempo delle iene* (Turin: Einaudi, 2015).[10] Marco Consentino, Domenico Dodaro and Luigi Panella published their novel on the subject of the former Italian Empire, with the suggestive title of *I fantasmi dell'Impero* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2017). Also in 2017, the novelist and screenwriter Francesca Melandri

approached the theme of the enduring legacy of Italian expansionism in her novel, *Sangue giusto* (Milan: Rizzoli).

The position from which each of these writers considers the events of the past and their enduring impact on the present is clearly quite different and this is reflected in the differing genres in which the authors write, in the voices that their characters assume, and in the very language in which the works are written. Yet, despite their manifold differences, every text so far mentioned evokes events belonging to the past, the personalities who were responsible for their unfolding and the spaces in which they took place. The texts do not seek only to engage the intellect of their reader, his or her capacity for appropriating and retaining information about the happenings of the past and the dynamics behind their occurrence. Their purpose is, rather, to involve the reader in the creation of a world that lies between fiction and historical reality, to hear the voices of the people/ characters who belong to that world, and to *experience* their relation to the action that unfolds in the course of the narrative. It is through the imaginative creation of the lives of the characters that the reader is inevitably led into a spiral of questions on the nature of Italy's historical relation with Africa; questions that concern the stability of the reader's own sense of selfhood and involvement in the slow, frequently obscure, inevitably inter-connected movement of history. Above all, the texts should not be seen as isolated literary creations but as a closely connected body of writing where individual examples serve to illuminate one another.

Having written recently on how the works of Dell'Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi address the question of the Italian presence in Africa, I would like with this article to take a slightly different approach.[11] I would like to focus on one of the most recent works of fiction to be produced on the memory of Italian expansionism, Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto*. The intention is to discuss both how the work develops a very distinctive approach to the need to remember the past and to see how the text illuminates, echoes and interacts with the writing of those transnational African/ Italian authors who have confronted the legacy of Italy's colonial past. Part of the intention of what follows is also to suggest how Melandri's novel allows its reader to understand how deeply the history of involvement in Africa is ingrained within Italy's transcultural past, its present and its likely future.

Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto*

Sangue giusto runs to over 500 pages, it stretches across three generations and it covers over 70 years of Italy's relationship with Africa. The narrative makes its readers feel that they are enmeshed in the secrets that the characters, in some cases, have woven together over decades or who, in other cases, have started slowly to unravel. The novel, by turns, induces sensations of bewilderment and unease as it uses narrative to explore the consequences of Italy's former colonial relationship with East Africa. The text clearly engages its reader in a series of highly complex emotional and epistemological processes. The question, in other words, that lies at the heart of the narrative is how it is possible to develop a consciousness of the deepest workings of Italian colonialism and what are the consequences of that consciousness. Given the explicit focus in the novel on secrets and their uncovering, one means of exploring the nature of the knowledge that the text imparts is to examine the implications of the secrets on which the action of the novel depends.

Sangue giusto begins with two events: the death in 2012 of the 97-year-old Attilio Profeti and the arrival, two years earlier, of a stranger outside the apartment of his youngest child, Ilaria – a teacher in her forties living in the multi-ethnic Esquiline quarter of Rome. The stranger, in his mid-twenties, announces that his name is Shimeta Ietmgeta Attilaprofeti, that he is Ethiopian and that he is the son of Ilaria's father and that, therefore, Ilaria is his aunt. The reaction of Ilaria is initially one of disbelief even amusement:

> "Tua zia!" La risata le solleva le spalle magre. "Non ci posso credere. Tua zia!" Butta fuori con forza l'aria dal naso, scuote la testa, poi si ricompone ma sulla faccia le rimane una traccia di sorriso (p. 15).
>
> ["Your aunt!" The burst of laughter makes her thin shoulders shake. "That I don't believe. Your aunt!" She snorts, shakes her head and then recomposes her features but the trace of a smile remains.][12]

But her response to the statement of Shimeta quickly turns from amusement into disorientation, concern and a nascent feeling of connection and obligation. In confronting the reader from the very beginning with a secret from the past, Melandri awakens her or his curiosity; the desire to know what lies behind the drama of the opening scene inspires the

reader to follow the pathways that will lead to the uncovering of the identity of the character who has stopped Ilaria on her doorstep with this extraordinary claim.

To begin with, the situation at the start of the novel is disturbing: Ilaria encounters a stranger but that stranger claims a close familial bond with her; she finds herself face to face not only with a person but with a past that is unknown to her; the familiarity that she has with her father is, in turn, instantly rendered strange and distant. What this uncanny conjunction of the familiar with the unfamiliar reveals is that there is a fundamental flaw within the conception of the immediate world that she inhabits. Rather than it being circumscribed within national boundaries and defined by an easily understood succession of periods in time, it encompasses a geography that is unknown to her and which has evolved according to a temporal logic that remains opaque. The disturbance experienced by the character is described in the following terms:

> Semplicemente, quel documento esotico [Shimeta's passport] che ora tiene in mano le ha creato un vuoto dentro, una specie di assenza: la cancellazione – momentanea ma totale – di ogni nesso di causa ed effetto tra le percezioni e pensieri (p. 16).
>
> [To put it simply, that exotic document that she now holds in her hand has created an internal sense of emptiness, a kind of absence: the cancellation – momentary but total – of every connection between cause and effect in her perceptions and her thoughts.]

This disturbance does not relate only to the apperception of the external world but also to the self's understanding of its very subjectivity. With the instant change in the identity of a significant other – Ilaria's father – in the life of the character, there comes the sensation of a dissonance between her consciousness of self in the present and the internal image of the person that she has always thought herself to be.

One of the many roles that Ilaria serves in the narrative is to dramatize the philosophical question of how an identity can be reconstituted after it has been shattered by the revelation of the falsity of a series of assumptions on which it is predicated. In terms that are purely abstract, the answer to this question lies in developing an understanding of the

complexity with which people are involved, often without their knowing, in the unfolding of vast historical processes. It lies in the ability to grasp the intuition that people's lives, and indeed their identities, are not situated within a single national context but within inter-cultural networks that stretch far back in time and that often bear the traces of past episodes of violence. It lies also in the – reluctant – acceptance that we are located within conceptual frameworks that retain elements of an imperfectly superseded colonial worldview.

The opening to the narrative of *Sangue giusto* is certainly dramatic and it creates an environment in which one revelation will follow on from another. It is also true that the nature of the opening is appropriate to the extremity of the events that will be retold and, to an extent, relived. But the sudden and unexpected apprehension by a member of one generation that she is not free from the actions of preceding generations is also a feature of Melandri's writing which suggests comparisons with other texts that are motivated by the need to uncover the enduring legacy of Italian colonialism. In every instance, the protagonist is positioned differently with regard to the happenings of the past. In Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori*, the main protagonist – Mahlet – discovers her vocation for telling the stories of those who lived through the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. In Scego's *Adua*, the story of the lead character Adua is interspersed with the memory of the brutality that her father, a Somali translator, suffered during the years of the regime. In Dell'Oro's *L'abbandono*, Marianna, the child of an Italian father and Eritrean mother, seeks – without resolution – to understand the motivation of her father in abandoning her mother.[13]

In *Sangue giusto*, the narrative is so constructed that there is no possibility of the drama of the issues with which it opens being resolved in a relatively straightforward manner: the neurodegenerative disease from which Attilio Profeti suffers in the final years of his life precludes any easily obtained explanation for the actions of the past. To achieve some kind of answer – some meaningful reconstitution of what she felt to be her family history and herself within that history – Ilaria is impelled to try to recreate the life of her father and the novel, in part, recreates the trajectory that her research follows; a trajectory in which the material fragments of the father's life are re-examined, old acquaintances of his are traced and archives that relate to incidents in a distant history are located and searched. The research interrogates the technologies of memory but always with urgency and always with trepidation as to what the research is likely to reveal.

Above all, at the heart of the narrative there is a two-directional journey. On the one hand, we have Shimeta's journey from Ethiopia to Italy. A journey that begins with the need to leave Addis Ababa following the suppression of political protests in 2008 (pp. 30-31), with the journey across southern Sudan and the desert of Libya, a highly precarious existence in Tripoli, the passage across the Strait of Sicily, the transfer from Lampedusa to a detention centre in Trapani, from there to a 'centro di accoglienza' (shelter) in Syracuse and finally, on receipt of a 'foglio di via' (expulsion order), the chance to travel to Rome. The representation of this journey provides Melandri with the means to document the realities experienced by distressed migrants arriving in Italy.[14] Within the economy of the novel, it provides her with the opportunity to hint at the structural similarity between Shimeta's movement towards the future and Ilaria's investigation of the past, between the material journey that he has undertaken and the epistemological journey that his arrival compels her to undertake. The point, suggested from the first meeting between the two in the hall of the apartment, is that the two characters mirror each other: both inhabit realities which are, or which become, disconcerting and threatening; both are connected, for very different reasons, with the past of Attilio Profeti; both make demands on the other; both are caught up, materially and immaterially, within the intricate legacies of Italian colonialism; and both, finally, are seeking some kind of resolution or emancipation.

It is a feature of fictional writing, however, that it confounds the reader's sense of anticipation not only by introducing rapid shifts in the direction of the narrative but also in the perspective in which the narrative is viewed. This is certainly the case in *Sangue giusto*. In the early part of the novel the expectation is that attention will continue to be focused on the recovery of the identity of Shimeta and on the nature of Ilaria's inquiry into the past. But as the novel progresses, we become aware that both these issues are, to some extent, framework stories. Their purpose is, in part, to establish the context of the present in which the past is reconstituted. What takes their place at the heart of the narrative is the story of Attilio Profeti. It is almost as though the figure which Ilaria is investigating suddenly comes to life as the attention of the third-person narrator switches from the complications of the present to that point in time when Attilio Profeti found himself engaged within the history of Italian expansionism.

There are, then, a series of shifts that occur within the narrative. In common with much fictional writing on the legacy of the Italian presence in Africa, the reader moves between the 1930s and a time that is much closer to the present. In Igiaba Scego's *Adua*, the writing shifts between the consciousness of the father and the daughter; in Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori*, the narration follows Mahlet from adolescence to early adulthood while delving, through the memory of different people, into the time of the occupation; in the work of Nicky Di Paolo, the time shifts between the years of the Italian presence in Asmara, the Eritrean war of independence and the end of the conflict. The effect of these rapid changes in temporal focus in transnational African/Italian literature serves to hint at the precariousness of the present and the hidden folds of its creation. It serves to suggest how the existence of past societies, with all their hierarchies and inequalities, can still be sensed in the perpetuation of everyday practices. In the words of Ghermandi, an emphasis on the *events* of the past should not obscure the fact that those happenings are inscribed in the way in which we experience *ourselves*.[15]

In *Sangue giusto* the shift from the encounter between Ilaria and Shimeta to the earlier life of Attilio Profeti and from Italy in the 2010s to Ethiopia in the late 1930s is disconcerting. In the course of the narrative, the reader now follows the actions of a character who is close to the operation of power and the construction of a racialized hierarchy on which it is based. At this point of the novel, the reader follows the course of his life, broadly speaking, according to three principles. Firstly, we witness his ability to exploit the opportunities that fortune consistently places in his path, or perhaps more precisely, through the portrayal of his character we see how fortune can be interpreted as the canniness that accompanies staying on the right side of those in power and how it prefers not to be impeded by empathy or excessive reflection. Secondly, we see how he is led by the impulses of his sexual instinct: though an assistant to Lidio Cipriani (see below) and entirely familiar with the Fascist policy of racial discrimination, he does not allow this to come in the way of satisfying his desire for sexual activity with Ethiopian women.[16] Thirdly, and most importantly, we are gradually and very subtly led to question how far – in his ability to exploit whatever circumstances befall him and in his determination to satisfy his sexual appetite – he simply adapts to the environment of which he is a part or how far he is a willing agent in actively advancing the brutal imposition of Italian rule in East Africa. The secret within the secret of his

participation in the Ethiopian campaign and its aftermath is that he contributes to a text by Cipriani on Fascist theories of race, specifically on 'La nostra razza in Africa' [Our race in Africa] (p.179), thus by the act of writing he moves from being an unthinking participant in the Italian colonial enterprise to an architect of its logic.

In looking deeper into each of the principles that structures his life as it is told in *Sangue giusto*, we discover not only how no feature of his life is separate from another but also how the narration of his life, while appearing to follow a logic of its own is actually responding to the questions that are posed of Profeti within the framing stories of Ilaria and Shimeta. Though this is implicit, we have an example of how the past becomes part of contemporary consciousness depending on the questions that we pose of it. This is a feature that is clear in all the transnational literary texts to which I have referred.

There is another dynamic at work in this crescendo of revelations. We become aware that, as readers, we are looking at Attilio Profeti in a dual perspective. At one level, we are witnessing the gradual uncovering of the extent of his involvement in some of the very worst episodes in the occupation of Ethiopia.[17] But at another level, he is not in himself the object of our interest: the role that he performs is, rather, as a means of revealing the secrets of the collectivity to which he belongs. Or, to put this point differently, the novel's revelation of secrets is, in one sense, conventional: it revolves around the discovery of the actions that someone has committed in the past and which have come to light in the present. In a different sense, the novel is concerned with the more philosophically complex question: that is, how the actions of an individual are imbricated within a crime that is perpetrated by a society.

For all his peculiarities and for all his egocentricity, Profeti is principally a means of knowing. Having constructed a character who is single-minded in his resolve to remain close to power, Melandri uses him as a device for recording the voices of some of the most prominent figures within the imposition of Italian rule in Ethiopia. It is principally through Profeti that we gain a perception of Rodolfo Graziani, commander of the southern front in the invasion of Ethiopia 1935-36 and Viceroy of Italian East Africa until December 1937, or the anthropologist and theorist of racial discrimination, Lidio Cipriani.[18] In drawing attention to the massacres that occurred under the period of Graziani's administration, Melandri's text provides another point from which to consider the horror of the events of

the past – one that strongly allies with transnational African/Italian writing as well as with recent developments in historiography. In Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori* the extremity of the brutality that characterized Graziani's administration emerges with unarguable clarity in the memories of those who lived through the period. The work of Ian Campbell, based principally on Ethiopian testimonies, demonstrates the degree of inhumanity of which the regime was capable.[19]

In those parts of *Sangue giusto* in which we find ourselves in the company of figures like Graziani and Cipriani we can see how Melandri has drawn elements from the biographical details of their lives together with excerpts from their writings and shaped them according to the conventions of the characterological construction of the novel. As a result, the reader has the illusion of being in their presence and following their thought processes – we see their intercourse with other people, the causes of their vanities and insecurities, their vindictiveness within the more general pattern of their responses.[20] We see how statements that may be familiar from their writings, when delivered in dialogue assume an emotive coloration that is deprived of a surrounding context of self-justification. In common with the experience of reading a text like Ciro Poggiali's diary with its first-hand account of life in the newly established empire, the reader feels the full extent of the sentiments that are expressed.[21] In many instances in his unpublished diary, Poggiali records the truly chilling statements made by Graziani and by high-ranking Fascist officials. He also becomes a witness of the Ethiopian resistance and the values on which it was based when he records of the statements made by Abuna Petros (1892-1936) during his trial.[22] Similarly, in Melandri's work, the reader is asked to interrogate all of the implications of what is said. The essential point is that the appearance of figures like Graziani and Cipriani within a work of creative writing does not does not serve to humanize them. Indeed, within the novel the inhumanity of some of the principal architects of the imperial enterprise emerges with greater force.

This is not to suggest that Melandri is simply saying that we can understand the occupation of Ethiopia if we see it as the result of the thought and actions of a relatively circumscribed group of men. What she is saying is far more complex and far more disquieting. Though figures like Cipriani and Graziani do, without doubt, play a role of considerable importance in deciding upon the peculiar nature of the Italian occupation of

Ethiopia, it is also true that they are part of a system of ideas and practices that is so entrenched – and therefore so unconsciously perpetuated – that it is not the object of any kind of reflection on their part. They are tools for the working of a system as well as the agents of its functioning. What the action of *Sangue giusto* is designed slowly to uncover is not only the individual crimes of the occupation but, through revelation after revelation, a collective societal construction at the core of which lies a body of ideas and fantasies concerning race.

In the world, partially illuminated by details of Attilio Profeti's earlier life, a vast biopolitical project is underway. If, following Foucault's elaboration of the term, we understand biopolitics to mean governance through the 'administration of bodies and the calculated management of life', then within the context of Italian imperialism that design assumes a brutally racial character.[23] In the course of the novel we may see the operation of this design most explicitly in the pronouncements of some of the leading figures within the regime, but it becomes evident in everything that the novel uncovers. The very attempt to establish Italian rule over a sovereign state several times larger than Italy itself indicates a fanatical belief in the putative qualities of the Italian 'race' – supposedly made manifest in the glories of ancient Rome and now celebrated in extravaganzas like the gigantic exhibition 'Italy Beyond the Seas', staged in Naples.[24] It is apparent in the refashioning of the material environment of Addis Ababa, observed as the background to the earlier life of Profeti:

> Dopo quattro anni di occupazione, quasi tutti gli abitanti indigeni di Addis Abeba erano stati trasferiti in periferia. Per le strutture che servivano sia ai coloni che ai colonizzati – mercati, edifici pubblici, luoghi di culto – erano previste vie di accesso separate. Trasporto pubblico, servizi e scuole erano segregati. La gerarchia tra le razze doveva essere consolidata dalla planimetria stessa della città. I neri erano ammessi in questo disegno solo in quanto al servizio dei bianchi. (p. 301)
>
> [After four years of the occupation, almost all the indigenous inhabitants of Addis Ababa had been transferred to the outskirts of the city. For all the structures which were supposed to serve both the colonizers and the colonized – markets, public buildings, places of worship – separate means of access were envisaged. Public

transport, services and schools were segregated. The hierarchy between different races was to be consolidated by the very plan of the city. Its black inhabitants were admitted to this design only insofar as they served the city's white inhabitants.]

It is evident in the extremity of the violence which is unleashed on any resistance to the imposition of Italian rule. It is apparent in the fantasies surrounding miscegenation – the belief, that is, that there is a border that defines what is and what is not 'sangue giusto' and that any mixing between Italians and Ethiopians will lead to the degeneration of the members of the occupying power.[25]

Yet, as Profeti is a tool that enables us to see the workings of the biopolitical project of the regime, so he acts as a means for showing us its contradictions. While we witness his role as an assistant to Lidio Cipriani, we also see his disregard for the introduction of the race laws through his pursuit of a relationship with an Ethiopian woman, Abeba, who is the mother of their child, Ietmgeta, and therefore the grandmother of Shimeta.[26] When Profeti is eventually prosecuted for his relationship with Abeba, his case comes before a judge, Carnaroli, who himself has a daughter with an Ethiopian woman, and who wonders about the application of the new legal strictures:

> Ma, ancora più spaventoso per un giurista, erano mutate le parole. Come quelle che ora leggeva sulla rivista. "La legislazione fascista mira a prevenire in modo assoluto la formazione del meticciato [...] Non ci sfugge la gravità del provedimento ma come si è detto si tratta di eliminare anche i singoli casi di nascite di meticci."
>
> "Eliminare." Parola sinistra, applicata agli umani [...] Dov'era il limite, si chiedeva Carnaroli, alla china presa con questa follia? (p. 298)
>
> [But still more frightening for a jurist, words had changed as well. Like those he read now in the review: "Fascist legislation aims to prevent in the most absolute way the formation of a mixed-race community […] The gravity of this course is clear to us and, as stated, we will also eliminate single cases of the birth of children of mixed race."

> "Eliminate." A sinister word when applied to human beings […] Where was the limit to the path that this madness had started upon?]

There is, in the novel, a play between appearance and reality, between the vision of the new world and the actuality of its realization, between the show of acquiescence and the pursuit of self-interest. In the case of Profeti, the disparity between outward appearance and inner motivation is extensively documented but it is also made manifest *materially*. Believing that his striking good looks are indicative of the qualities of the Italian 'race', Cipriani has a cast of his head made for the *Mostra delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare*. The intention is that the simulacrum will perform a role in the racial education of Italians:

> Profeti era la conferma vivente, l'incarnazione si poteva dire, di quel razzismo scientifico a cui Cipriani aveva dedicato anni di vita [...] La bellezza era il segno più distintivo ed evidente della superiorità di razza. (p. 304)

> [Profeti was the living proof, the incarnation one could say, of that scientific racism to which Cipriani had dedicated years of his life […] Beauty was the most distinctive and evident sign of racial superiority.]

By dramatizing the very manufacture of the mask, the novel suggests that the key to the enigma of Profeti's identity lies in understanding how his statuesque appearance hides the self-serving nature of his personality, his rampant sexual appetite, his willingness to dupe whoever he encounters, his inability to experience empathy, and his capacity to survive at all costs. An intended archetype of *italianità* in the exhibition of Italy beyond the seas – the colossal hall of mirrors of Italian expansionism – he appears as one thing to his superiors, another to those over whom he has some power and quite another to his family and friends. The reader is never sure how to balance the monstrosity of many of his actions with some of the gestures of which he is capable; and indeed, it is never clear who he is or what it is that he really represents.

Conclusion

The reader of *Sangue giusto* becomes aware of the structure of the secret around which the action of the novel revolves. There is first the inquiry into who Shimeta is or claims to be. The pursuit of the answer to this question leads to the discovery of the past of Ilaria's father; not only his involvement but his *agency* in the expansionist drive which, from the mid-1930s, was to define the development and ultimately the demise of Italian Fascism. The focus on the previous life of the father uncovers the nature of the society of which he was part and the racially determined project that lay at its core. As one secret after another unravels in the course of the novel, the work impels its reader to consider the way in which secrets – with real effects on the lives of people – tend to work.

The novel suggests that a secret is rarely an isolated occurrence; that one secret tends to shed light upon another; that, in many instances, a secret involves elements belonging both to the private and the public sphere. The very intuition of the existence of a secret can prove intimidating and the discovery of a secret has the power to expose the fragility of a relatively settled order of things and, by so doing, cause a potentially ruining chain of effects. The need to discover generates its own momentum, but, most significantly, a secret has consequences for the person who discovers. A secret can, in other words, perform a function akin to that of a mirror: when we look into it, we become aware of who is looking. The nature of the inquiry, in other words, bears an imprint of ourselves. When Shimeta arrives at Ilaria's door he clearly carries a question as to who he is, but – and this point is crucial – he also delivers an injunction to Ilaria to know who *she* is.

By focussing on two of these characteristics of the secret, one can, by way of conclusion, isolate what are among the most arresting insights of Melandri's novel. In uncovering the secret of the father's involvement in the Ethiopian campaign and, by so doing, gaining a perception of the nature of the colonial enterprise as a whole, Ilaria is – perhaps unknowingly to begin with – undermining the foundations on which her world is built. In setting in motion a series of revelations that will destroy her perception of the world and her place within it, she experiences feelings of bewilderment, vulnerability and the inability to cope. Melandri writes:

> A occhi chiusi, tutte le cose che ha appreso su suo padre nel giro di due giorni le si aggrovigliano in quel punto imprecisato in mezzo agli occhi che identifica come luogo della propria coscienza. Si sente uno di quei profeti stupidi che hanno osato dire al numinoso: "Rivelati!" e finiscono accecati. (p. 197)
>
> [With her eyes closed, all of the things that she had learned of her father in the course of two days were swimming in that undefined point behind the eyes where she locates her consciousness. She feels like one of those misguided prophets who have dared to address the divine with the injunction "Reveal Thyself!" and ends up by being blinded.]

What the novel represents is the downfall of a settled understanding of reality and the feelings of trepidation and anxiety that are attendant on this. But the point is not simply to document the trauma that accompanies the collapse of an edifice of certainties, it is rather to represent a shattering *epistemological* experience. Or rather, an experience in which the familiar perceptual world of the individual gives way and is replaced by a new and different way of making sense of the meaning of events and their surrounding context. With the revelation of the role that her father performed in the occupation of Ethiopia and the revelation of the system of which he was a part, it is not just the past that comes into focus but the present. In the light of this knowledge, Ilaria can see how such events as the visit of Gaddafi to Rome in 2008 (pp. 72-74) belong to the afterlife of Italian colonial involvement in Africa and how she is involved in a temporality whose movement may previously have been unclear or, at least, not of direct concern to herself. Just as she can see how initiatives like that to build a monument to Graziani in the town of Affile, east of Rome, indicate the extent of the limitations of public awareness of the crimes perpetuated in the name of imperial expansion.

Whatever response the reader may have towards Ilaria, the role that she fulfils is principally that of developing greater understanding of the impact of the past on the present. It is through her mode of questioning that the reader learns of the nature of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and of its brutal racialist character. But what is also important is the *position* from which she is able to develop a knowledge of the past. The knowledge

that she attains is that of a figure whose family members have participated in the expansionist drive under Fascism, it is that of someone living in Rome, and it is that of someone who exists predominantly within an Italian cultural context. The novel dramatizes how she becomes conscious that the co-ordinates of her identity stretch far beyond national confines and far beyond the notion of history to which she had become accustomed.

A parallel can be drawn between the position that Ilaria occupies within *Sangue giusto* and the role that the novel itself plays within the wider context of writing on the legacy of the Italian presence in Africa. Melandri's inquiry into the epistemological experience of a figure like Ilaria assumes greater significance when the novel is seen as part of a larger – and expanding – corpus of writing; a corpus that is made up of the work of writers who explore the positionality and experience of a range of figures, many of who – as is the case in Ghermandi's *Regina*, Scego's *Adua* and in the Ethiopian-American writer, Maaza Mengiste's forthcoming *The Shadow King* – provide testimony of the full force of Fascist repression.[27] One of the roles that transnational writing of this kind fulfils, as a number of recent critical studies have examined, is that in enabling the reader to see the full extent of Italian colonial aggression from multiple viewpoints, it changes how the very question of national belonging is formulated.[28]

One of the most startling revelations of Melandri's text is not the sudden apprehension of connections between different decades of Italian history or the clarity with which the implications of expressions of nostalgia for empire, such as the planned monument for Graziani, are understood. It is rather that ideas and fantasies that are central to the biopolitical project of the 1930s cannot be viewed as belonging to the past but need, instead, to be seen as operating – albeit in an altered and less recognizable form – within the cultural and social fabric of contemporary society and within the way in which people view themselves and other people. The novel confronts us with the unanticipated proximity of the colonial world. The past, in other words, exercises a mysterious, concealed but nonetheless potentially terrifying agency in the present while the colonial world ceases to appear as a reality that can be experienced only through archival records of the period. The same sense of the pressure of the past underlies Scego's analysis of 'structural racism' and its colonial provenance in her 2018 article, 'Italy is my country – but it must face its racist past'.[29]

Within *Sangue giusto*, Ilaria becomes aware of the instrumental nature of the association that politicians draw between immigration and criminality (p. 58); of the role of extreme right-wing parties in government over a lengthy period of time (p. 103); of the racial associations made in the posters of the Lega (Nord) (p. 49). She traces the connections of her father with right-wing circles in the wake of the collapse of Fascism and even asks *herself* whether racist attitudes play any part in her thoughts and her behaviour towards people (pp. 86-87). But, above all, it is through Shimeta – Ilaria's double and secret sharer – that she develops an emotional awareness and an inter-subjective understanding of the ascriptions that are made according to skin colour and of the racialized discourses that continue to surround the question of identity. The title of the novel, *Sangue giusto*, alludes to the hierarchy of cultures and the racial determinism that defined the imperial project of the 1930s but it also refers to the physical, cultural and bureaucratic barriers across which Shimeta has to pass first to arrive and subsequently to remain in Italy. The title also, of course, makes an explicit allusion to the principle of nationality law, *jus sanguinis*, which determines who does and who does *not* have access to citizenship. In a detention centre, waiting to be repatriated, Shimeta reflects on a fellow detainee:

> Questo ventenne è qui in attesa che lo rispediscano in Costa d'Avorio, un Paese di cui non ha ricordi e non parla la lingua e dove non conosce nessuno. Perché in Italia non basta avere l'intera famiglia in Italia, frequentare la scuola pubblica italiana e, sopratutto, tifare la Magica come tutti i tuoi amici, per essere trattato da cittadino. Conta solo il liquido che ti scorre dentro le vene, come dice la legge chiamata *ius sanguinis*.
>
> [This twenty-year-old is waiting to be sent back to the Ivory Coast, a country of which he has no memory and whose language he does not speak and where he knows no one. Because in Italy it is not enough to have one's whole family in Italy, to go to an Italian school and, above all, to support Roma like all your friends, to be treated like a citizen. The only thing that counts is the liquid that runs in your veins, as defined by *jus sanguinis*.]

Sabrina Varani's documentary of 2107, *Pagine nascoste*, examined the genesis of Melandri's novel and the theme of amnesia surrounding the occupation of Ethiopia that it addresses.[30] It used archival footage of the occupation and interviews of people in both Ethiopia and Italy to demonstrate the extreme brutality of which the occupying power was capable. One of the modes of inquiry that the documentary employs is to focus on Melandri's questioning of her own sense of positionality and how the knowledge that her father was a committed supporter of Mussolini's regime disturbs her memories of childhood, her perception of her identity and her sense of involvement in national and transnational temporalities. The concentration on the author's relationship with her father in the documentary illustrates how the position that a subject adopts with relation to the past calls into question some of the most profoundly rooted feelings of the individual.[31] In following the author to sites within Ethiopia, *Pagine nascoste* also demonstrates visually the transnational nature of the composition of *Sangue giusto* and its connection to other forms of inquiry – whether literary or historical – and the position from which they create knowledge. The documentary concludes with Melandri, together with Igiaba Scego, visiting the monument to Graziani in Affile and asking how such disregard for what has happened in the past is possible and what it indicates about the cultural context in which it occurs.

Pagine nascoste has been shown on several occasions on Italian national television. It allows its audience a visual and auditory experience of sites of key historical significance in Ethiopia as well as an insight into the structure of Melandri's work and its thematic connections with a much larger body of representations. Above all, it indicates the role that an author's work can perform in allowing its readers to develop an awareness of the functioning of memory at a collective and at an individual level, of the properties of inter-generational transmission and of the structures of repression and recovery. It indicates, in other words, how Melandri's work and the wider corpus of postcolonial and transnational writing to which it belongs can perform a dynamic role within the subjectivity of the reader, placing different historical periods in contiguous perspective and opening new ways of considering the past. In a world in which we witness, with increasing frequency, officially sanctioned instances of racism and intolerance, the need to develop modes of inquiry that engage a capacity for identification, empathy or, indeed, a vicarious sense of guilt and which

suggest how it is possible to develop transcultural understandings of both the past and the present [32] could not be clearer nor of greater urgency.

[1] See, for example, the special issue, 'Italian Colonialism: Historical Perspectives', eds. Jacqueline Andall, Charles Burdett and Derek Duncan, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 2003, 8 (3).
[2] These texts include: *Italian Colonialism*, eds. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, eds. J. Andall and D. Duncan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005); *L'Impero fascista: Italia e Etiopia (1935-41)*, ed. Riccardo Bottoni (Bologna: il Mulino, 2008).
[3] Examples of recent additions to this body of work include, Neelam Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930-1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); *Quel che resta dell'Impero*, eds. Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, (Milan: Mimesis, 2014); Emanuele Ertola, *In terra d'Africa: Gli italiani che colonizzarono l'impero* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2017).
[4] The following list of writers is clearly not intended to be comprehensive. It focuses on texts that have concentrated in the Italian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea during the occupation and immediately after the Second World War. For a detailed study, see Daniele Comberiati, *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall'Africa coloniale all'Italia di oggi* (Rome: Pigreco, 2007). For an analysis of the way in which the Italian occupation has been represented in Ethiopian literature, see Sara Marzagora, 'Nationalism: The Italian Occupation in Amharic Literature and Political Thought' in *The Horn of Africa and Italy: Colonial, Postcolonial and Transnational Cultural Encounters*, eds. Simone Brioni and Shimelis Bonsa Gulema, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 141-67.
[5] For further biographical details on Ghermandi, see the site *Enciclopedie de Estudios Afroeuropeos*, at http://www.encyclopediaofafroeuropeanstudies.eu/encyclopedia/gabriella-ghermandi/ (accessed 8 July 2019). Ghermandi speaks about her own life and her intention to perform the songs of the Ethiopian resistance in the short video, 'La resistenza in etiopia contro gli invasori', available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWwASmpqzxE (accessed 8 July 2019).
[6] Gabriella Ghermandi, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007). The postface is written by Cristina Lombardi-Diop. On the significance of the work of Ghermandi, see also Martine Bovo Romoeuf, 'Vers un canon postcolonial multicultural: les cas paradigmatiques de Gabriella Ghermandi et Martha Nasibù', in *Memoria storica e postcolonialismo*, eds. M. Bovo Romoeuf and Franco Manai (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 83-113.
[7] See, for example, the collaboration between Ethiopian and Italian musicians in Ghermandi's Atse Tewodros. For more information, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWb49RGAv9c (accessed 3 April 2019).
[8] For more information on Igiaba Scego, see the biographical and bibliographical information compiled by Simone Brioni at the site of the Institute of Modern Languages Research: https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-study-contemporary-womens-writing/languages/italian/igiaba-scego (accessed 2 April 2019).
[9] Di Paolo, *Mentuab*, p. 9.
[10] Alessandro Triulzi's is critical of some of the apparently nostalgic language that Lucarelli uses in his fictional writing on empire. See 'Hidden Faces, Hidden Histories: Contrasting Voices of Postcolonial Italy' in Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity, eds. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Palgrave Macmillan: New York and Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 103-113 (p. 108).
[11] See 'Transnational Time: Reading Post-War Representations of the Italian Presence in East Africa', Italian Studies, Vol. 73 2018 (3), pp. 274-288, available at: https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00751634.2018.1487108.
[12] All translations from *Sangue giusto* are my own.
[13] Erminia Dell'Oro, *L'abbandono: una storia eritrea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).
[14] The term 'distressed migrants' is used by Jacqueline Bhabha in *Can We Solve the Migrant Crisis?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).
[15] See 'La Resistenza in Etiopia contro gli invasori': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWwASmpqzxE (accessed 11 July 2019).

[16] For a history of the hierarchical ideas regarding race that Fascism perpetuated, see the first two chapters of Mia Fuller's *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 23-62.
[17] Profeti ends his time in Ethiopia employed by the Colonial Police in the suppression of acts of resistance and the novel details his participation (pp. 446-453) in one episode that is typical of the extreme brutality with which any opposition to Italian rule was treated. For a detailed account of the atrocities that followed the attempt on Graziani's life, see Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame* (Oxford: OUP, 2017).
[18] For the development of anthropology under Fascism see Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi* (Naples: Liguori, 1998).
[19] Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre*.
[20] Details of the research that Melandri undertook in the course of writing *Sangue giusto* are given at the end of the novel, pp. 525-27.
[21] See *Diario AOI 1936-1937* (Milan: Longanesi, 1971).
[22] The Abuna Petros was executed by the Italian authorities in July 1936.
[23] On the development of a biopolitical discourse in Italy before the advent of Fascism, see Rhiannon Welch *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy 1860-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
[24] For a record of the exhibition see, *Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare, Napoli, 9 maggio – 15 ottobre 1940* (Turin: Monti, 1940).
[25] For more information on the development of Cipriani's thought, see Tommaso Dell'Era, 'Appunti sulla formazione dell'antropologia di Lidio Cipriani' (1892-1925) in *Quel che resta dell'Impero*, pp. 39-58.
[26] For a clear statement that the widespread existence of sexual relationships between Italians and members of the subject populations of Italian East Africa cannot be seen simply as the disregard for colonial racism, see the conclusion to Sòrgoni's *Parole e corpi*, pp. 249-256.
[27] *The Shadow King* is due to appear with W. W. Norton and Company in September 2019.
[28] See, for example, Lombardi-Diop and Romero, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*; Brioni and Gulema, *The Horn of Africa and Italy*.
[29] The article was published on 16 September 2018. See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/16/italy-must-face-racist-history (accessed 23 May 2019).
[30] *Parole nascoste*, dir. Sabrina Varani, 2017.
[31] The theme of paternity is an important part of the works by Melandri that preceded the publication of *Sangue giusto*, *Eva dorme* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010) and *Più alto del mare* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012).
[32] See in this context, Paolo Bertella Farnetti's essay on the need to share memory, 'Italy's Colonial Past between Private Memories and Collective Amnesia' in *Colonialism and National Identity*, eds. P. Bertella Farnetti and Cecilia Dau Novelli (Cambridge: CSP, 2015), pp. 212-230.